

INSTRUCTION OF THE BLIND IN  
THE CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**

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## Instruction of the Blind in the Chicago Public Schools

SYSTEMATIC instruction of the blind in the United States was begun only eighty years ago, when Dr. Samuel G. Howe founded the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. The early schools were privately endowed, but as time passed, the education of the blind came to be viewed not as a matter of charity but as a legitimate part of public policy and the various states in quick succession founded state institutions. These institutions have done, and are still doing, most excellent work, but they necessitate the separation of the child from home and neighborhood for many years—a separation regarded by educators of the blind as unfavorable to proper growth.

The basis of the work now being carried on in Chicago is the recognition of the importance of maintaining the home as a factor in the blind child's life, and the recognition of the value of his development in close touch with community life. The aim is to secure for him as near an approach as possible to normality in capacity and spirit. By remaining at home, he acquires an interest in all that vitally affects the family. It is an advantage to him to share its struggles, hopes, and successes. The members of the family, by being brought into daily contact with his school life, are led to render him intelligent aid; and a sense of responsibility comes to them for his success which is apt to be lacking where the blind child is sent away to school. By attending the public school, he develops in a normal environment—one not differing materially from that which must be his when school days are over. He forms ties of friendship, acquires interests, and becomes possessed of habits of thought that make it easy and agreeable for him to associate with others, and he learns to measure himself by average standards of success.

Blind pupils were admitted to the Chicago public schools for the first time in September of 1900, and instruction is now



given them in four of the elementary schools. From six to ten attend each school. By forming groups in designated centers, the work can be more effectively supervised than it could were each child to go to the school in his immediate neighborhood. Where transportation is necessary, the Board of Education furnishes car-fare instead of providing busses, as is done for the crippled children. In each center, a room is reserved for the use of the blind, in which are kept books, maps, and all apparatus specially adapted to their needs. The room is in charge of a special teacher, who has general supervision of the work of the pupils throughout their entire course. The Board of Education maintains a printing office where text books in all the elementary subjects and in some high school subjects are copied into the Braille system of raised print and furnished free of cost to the pupils.

Since it is the aim to secure to the blind child a very large participation in school life, an effort is made to have him take part in the regular classes as early as possible. As a rule this cannot be done fully during the first two years. The pupil often enters school hampered by timidity and by lack of physical control. The necessity of giving self confidence and the power of self control is urgent and calls for special attention. Then, too, he must be taught to read and write the Braille system, which is unfamiliar to the ordinary teacher. Owing to these considerations, the first and second grade pupils spend most of the day in the room of the special teacher. In the first grade they usually take part in the classes for singing and the reproduction of stories. When the second grade is reached, they are generally ready to enter the reading class. From the third grade on, they take an active part in all recitations, though they continue to receive aid from the special teacher throughout the entire course. It is the duty of the special teacher to watch closely the work of every pupil in all classes. She must often read from supplementary books, copy matter into Braille, and construct special diagrams and other devices that may be necessary to make any subject clear.

The reading recitation presents little difficulty to the blind pupil, his work differing from the other members of the class only in that he reads from a Braille book. Although

his reading is somewhat slower than theirs, nevertheless, he is able to keep the place and can read with sufficient fluency to observe proper expression.

In the study of geography, special globes and maps are used. Sand to the thickness of about an eighth of an inch is glued upon a globe to represent the land, while the uncovered surface represents the water. By examining such a globe, pupils gain an accurate idea of the earth as a whole. For more detailed work, embossed maps are used, distinctive lines and characters being employed to represent various features, such as boundary lines between countries, mountain systems, rivers, and large bodies of water. The names of cities are indicated by letters whose significance is explained by the key accompanying the map.

In arithmetic, the pupils read from the Braille copy and work problems on Braille number slates which are made at the Lane Technical High School. A slate of this kind is an aluminum plate, ten inches square and a quarter of an inch in thickness, mounted upon wood. The entire slate is divided into pockets just large enough to admit a three-eighth inch cube, upon the faces of which are Braille numbers. By properly arranging the cubes in the pockets, any number may be expressed, and with a box of one hundred cubes a problem involving any arithmetical process may be solved.

Lessons in grammar, spelling, history, and civics are prepared from the Braille text, just as school children study them from the ordinary book. All written lessons and examinations are handed in by the pupil in Braille; and as the papers, after being transcribed by the special teacher are corrected and marked by the grade teacher, the work is judged according to the standard prevailing in the school.

Hand-training being especially important in the education of the blind, great care is given to this subject. In the earlier grades, the making of bead articles such as cups and saucers, napkin rings, baskets and flowers has proved to be most valuable. It calls for concentration, develops hand-control, arouses interest, and brings the pleasure of creating a finished product. The boys of the upper grades are given the elementary course in manual training. Taught to use rulers with raised lines, they are able, after a little practice,



to measure accurately to an eighth of an inch. They readily recognize all the tools in an elementary shop and can use them with a fair degree of skill. The girls of the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades learn to sew, knit, crochet, and embroider. They attend the cooking class, taking an active part in the recitation and keeping accurate note-books in Braille.

After finishing the work of the elementary school, several blind pupils have completed the high school course, and some have gone to college. As yet, no special teacher has been appointed for high school work. Each pupil attends the high school nearest his home. Though he finds some of the text books in Braille, a large part of his work must be read to him. This is done partly at home by members of his family, and partly at school by members of his class. The special teachers from the elementary centers also assist the high school pupils, going to their homes at the close of the school day. In the high school typewriting is easily mastered, thus making it possible for written work to be presented directly to the instructor. The blind student joins the literary and debating societies, attends class meetings, and enjoys all the features of our stirring high school life.

The public school plan of educating the blind has, within the last few years, been taken up by New York city, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and other cities. The movement seems destined to grow. Having demonstrated its strength on the side of home and general culture, it must expand along lines of particular vocations. Remunerative employment at the end of school days should reward the efforts of all diligent blind pupils of average ability; and if those in charge of the public school work earnestly strive with this end in view, they may achieve a large measure of success.

Supervisor of Schools for the Blind,  
Chicago.

JOHN B. CURTIS.

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